

Epilogue

The preceding pages attempt to trace and correlate some of the important moments in the earliest development of Icelandic prose literature. Since much of the scholarly debate over the last hundred years has focused on the question of what oral tradition may have paved the way for the sagas, the discussion does not begin with the first written records but with two chapters on the oral antecedents. These antecedents were minimized during much of the twentieth century, but three books by Gísli Sigurðsson and Tommy Danielsson in 2002 reemphasized the probability that there was a substantial storytelling tradition underlying the sagas. Chapter 1 supports this view and tries to adduce some evidence that the stories were not only plentiful but could also be long and detailed. It is of some importance to know from what materials the saga writers worked because the nature of these materials sheds light on the writing procedures that must have been employed. It will further our understanding of the sagas if we can establish whether the authors were creating imaginative fictions or were composing in imitation of familiar traditions. At this moment in history there seems to be widespread agreement that native traditions were the chief inspiration.

Whereas a good deal of labor has been devoted to defining what form these traditions may have taken in the case of the native sagas, no corresponding labor has been invested in the antecedents of the kings' sagas. Yet the wealth of information about the Norwegian kings found in a variety of Icelandic sagas suggests that they too must have left a

considerable mark on the evolving narratives in Iceland. Accordingly a short second chapter tries to generalize about what the Icelanders would have known and what they would have transmitted about earlier kings in the preliterate period. Though abundant, this information would have been more remote than the native Icelandic stories and would have conveyed less personalized and dramatic images of the kings than of the Saga Age chieftains in Iceland. The information clearly also passed through a self-consciously Icelandic filter that detracted not a little from the stature of the kings and enhanced the stature of the Icelanders who interacted with them. This tendency is particularly apparent in the so-called *þættir*, which sometimes pit Icelanders against Norwegian kings in tests of character. This less than impartial perspective carries over to the written tradition in the course of time.

Nonetheless, the writing of kings' sagas begins in a panegyric vein with biographies of King Óláfr Tryggvason and King Óláfr Haraldsson, who are the subject of the third chapter. The initial problem is to establish the chronology of these texts, a somewhat vexed undertaking since neither survives in its original form. The saga of Óláfr Tryggvason is extant only in three redactions of an Icelandic translation from the Latin original by a Benedictine monk named Oddr Snorrason in the northern Icelandic monastery of Þingeyrar. The earliest saga of Óláfr Haraldsson survives only in six fragments and later redactions. The two texts nevertheless have a number of motifs and passages in common, and a close comparison suggests that the author of Óláfr Haraldsson's saga made use of Oddr's biography. We can therefore establish with some probability that the writing of the kings' sagas began in Þingeyrar.

Although the original purpose of these sagas seems to have been the praise of kings, this purpose was subject to a counterbalancing interest in the Norwegian colonial areas in the Orkney and Faroe Islands, and most particularly in what appears to have been a sharp provincial counterthrust in the lost **Hlaðajarla saga*. This text can be tentatively reconstructed from the later compilations in *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna*, and it apparently promoted the cause of the jarls of Þrændalög in opposition to the southern dynasty of Norwegian kings dating from the days of Haraldr hárfagri. The sagas thus seem to have

incorporated something resembling a political dialogue dating from at least the second decade of the thirteenth century.

A particularly instructive commingling of Norwegian history with native Icelandic attitudes is evident in the version of Óláfr Haraldsson's saga that forms the centerpiece of *Heimskringla*. This text continues to draw heavily on Icelandic traditions that must have circulated orally. A number of *páttr*-like stories record the interaction of various Icelandic visitors, and it is often possible to make informed guesses about the conduits that transmitted these stories to Iceland and how they were passed down over the generations. As in the other *pættir*, the Icelanders loom disproportionately large and sometimes raise questions about the conduct of the king. There is also a certain amount of overt political discussion about the relationship of the people to their kings, albeit located at the diplomatically safe distance of the Swedish royal court. Sometimes the authorial sympathies seem to lie with the Norwegian provincial chieftains, as if there were some association between Icelandic colonials and Norwegian provincials. This association is emphasized by the marked discrepancy between the saga prose and the contemporary stanzas recorded in it with respect to the tension between king and chieftains. These tensions are cast as an important factor in the downfall of King Óláfr, but they are scarcely alluded to in the stanzas. That suggests that resistance to the monarchy may have been more significant in the Icelandic transmission than in the Norwegian perception.

The *Heimskringla* version of King Óláfr Haraldsson's saga is conventionally dated in the third decade of the thirteenth century, but it is a work in progress and could have been in the making a little earlier. If there is an anti-monarchical bias, it is quite muted and must be read from between the lines. A clearer Icelandic perspective on kingship becomes explicit in another important compilation of kings' sagas known as *Morkinskinna* and written around 1220. This work covers the period 1035 to 1157 and appears to classify the kings in this period in two easily distinguishable groups, three kings who were notable for aggressive foreign policy and three others who promoted peace and prosperity on the domestic front. There seems to be no doubt that the author favors the latter group and is critical of the former. This structure is explored in chapter 5.

Although *Morkinskinna* can be read as a set of recommendations on Norwegian foreign policy, it did not bequeath this viewpoint to Part III of *Heimskringla*, for which it was the chief source. On the contrary, the author of *Heimskringla* III seems to have modified the political contrasts in his source systematically, with the result that the royal portraits are more uniformly positive in his version. Whether this revision represents a difference in opinion, a diplomatic accommodation, or a calculated adjustment for a Norwegian readership is hard to know without more evidence, but *Heimskringla* provides a distinctive reading of history. Most difficult to fathom is the political outlook in *Egils saga*, which may be contemporary with *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*. Egill is an almost caricaturally larger-than-life figure in whose presence everyone else, including two Norwegian kings, shrinks by comparison. Whether he is to be understood as a serious representation of the individual Icelander at his most exalted or a comically exaggerated and over-assertive Icelandic bully is an open question. If we choose the first option, Egill serves to relativize the domination of the Norwegian crown, which is taken for granted in earlier sagas. But if we adopt the second option, the saga becomes a critique of Icelandic self-promotion. The choice is left to the reader, but either way, there is a political edge to the narrative.

Egils saga illustrates that the political preoccupations of the kings' sagas can echo quite distinctly in the native sagas. Chapter 6 pursues this line of inquiry with respect to three sagas from Eyjafjörður. Once more the problem is complicated by the need to resolve chronological issues that have been debated for more than a hundred years. The position taken here is that *Víga-Glúms saga* is the earliest text in this group and may date from ca. 1215–1220. *Reykðæla saga* made direct use of *Víga-Glúms saga* and must therefore be a little later. *Ljósuetninga saga* is the most advanced of the three, but there are reasons for believing that it too is quite early and was most probably written in the 1220s.

All three are concerned with regional hostilities, perhaps a local reflex of the larger national hostilities in the kings' sagas. All three resolutely dispense with the historical hegemony of Norway and the backdrop of emigration from Norway, as if to make the point that the action has now moved definitively to Iceland. Both Glúmr and

his father Eyjólfur do, however, make their way in Norway, Eyjólfur to the extent of marrying a chieftain's daughter. Legitimation in Norway seems to be a matter of establishing credentials and will persist in that function in the Icelandic sagas throughout the century. Eyjólfur's success is particularly conspicuous because it is achieved in the teeth of anti-Icelandic sentiment.

The preponderant evidence suggests that the author of *Reykðæla saga* borrowed an episode describing a dramatic confrontation between Víga-Glúmr and Víga-Skúta from *Víga-Glúms saga*. Not only does it appear that he borrowed an episode, but a case can also be made that he built a total response to the earlier saga around the borrowed episode. Glúmr is one of the most notorious tricksters in saga literature and triumphs more often by guile than by force of arms. By contrast, Áskell Eyvindarson, who dominates the action in the first part of *Reykðæla saga*, is established as the most clear-browed and scrupulous chieftain to be found anywhere in the sagas, the antithesis of and antidote to Glúmr. In addition, the conclusion of *Reykðæla saga* seems to echo the conclusion of *Víga-Glúms saga* in order to controvert it, in effect to qualify Glúmr's preeminence by suggesting that Áskell's son Skúta was every bit Glúmr's equal. What we have before us then is a comparison of chieftains not unlike the comparison of kings in *Morkinskinna*. The author of *Reykðæla saga* is bent on contesting the version of history presented in *Víga-Glúms saga*; like the writers of kings' sagas he shapes the narrative as a political debate.

The most accomplished of the Eyjafjörður sagas is *Ljósvetninga saga*. It too is a story of regional conflict, pitting the all-powerful chieftain at Mòðruvellir, Guðmundr ríki, against a considerably less well established group, the Ljósvetningar, a little to the east. Power prevails both in Guðmundr's generation and that of his successor Eyjólfur, but there is a novel twist. The author undermines Guðmundr at every turn, demonstrating that success is one thing but good character quite another. Guðmundr has a good deal in common with the overreaching kings of *Morkinskinna*, and his saga, far from being a celebration of his triumph, is an unsparing critique of his conduct. Although the feud framework familiar from *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Reykðæla saga* remains in place for the purpose of plot, action is

no longer of capital importance and the panegyric mode has been abandoned. *Ljósvetninga saga* renders personal and moral judgments and opens up quite new perspectives in saga writing.

These new perspectives are pursued in greater depth in Chapter 7, in which a very early saga, *Fóstbræðra saga* (1200–1210?), is compared with a later saga from the same region, *Gísla saga* (1230–1250?). This is not so much a comparison of individual texts as it is a comparison of an old style with a new style. The old style records a chronicle of hostile actions without much attention to the lives of those involved and without much comment; the action is rigorously externalized. The new style is just as rigorously internalized and probes the experience and relationships of the characters in considerable detail. The burden of the narrative in *Gísla saga* is shifted away from the actual occurrences, although these are exceptionally well told, and is refocused on the effect these occurrences produce in the characters. The clarification of character is indeed one of the larger trajectories in the development of the sagas and reaches a level of complexity in *Gísla saga* only to be matched in *Laxdæla saga* and *Njáls saga*. The study of personalities is quite limited in the kings' sagas and the early native sagas; in *Egils saga* it is overblown and not calculated to engage the reader in ordinary human terms. But beginning with *Gísla saga*, it becomes one of the great distinctions of saga literature.

What appears in this volume as a sequence of Chapters 1–5 originated as separate studies of particular texts or groups of texts. In their present reincarnation, only slightly revised, they retain the marks of their separate origin, but they have in common that they focus on the earliest sagas and how these texts relate to one another in terms of outlook. Chapters 6–7 are added to extend the idea of interlocking attitudes a little farther into the thirteenth century. The general thesis is that the sagas under study react to one another politically and literarily in such a way as to suggest an ongoing debate, never formulated in so many words but always implied in fairly tangible ways. Thus **Hlaðajarla saga* appears to be a Þrændalög response to the exclusive claims of the central monarchy, and *Morkinskinna* can be read as an analysis of royal policy. *Heimskringla* in turn can be understood as a neutralizing and diplomatic counter to *Morkinskinna*, and *Egils saga* conceals its political outlook in ambiguity. The first sagas from

Eyjafjörður, perhaps in the spirit of **Hlaðajarla saga*, suggest a dismissal of the focus on kings and a countervailing assertion of Icelandic prerogatives. But even within this new regional context, *Reykðæla saga* can be interpreted as a rebuttal of *Víga-Glúms saga*, and *Ljósvetninga saga* as a commentary on chieftainship analogous to the discussion of kingship in *Morkinskinna*. Finally, in a purely literary sphere, *Gísla saga* looks like a firm rejection of the feud saga as it was practiced in Eyjafjörður and in *Fóstbræðra saga*. Thus all of these sagas seem interconnected in an ongoing discussion about the political and literary issues of the day.

